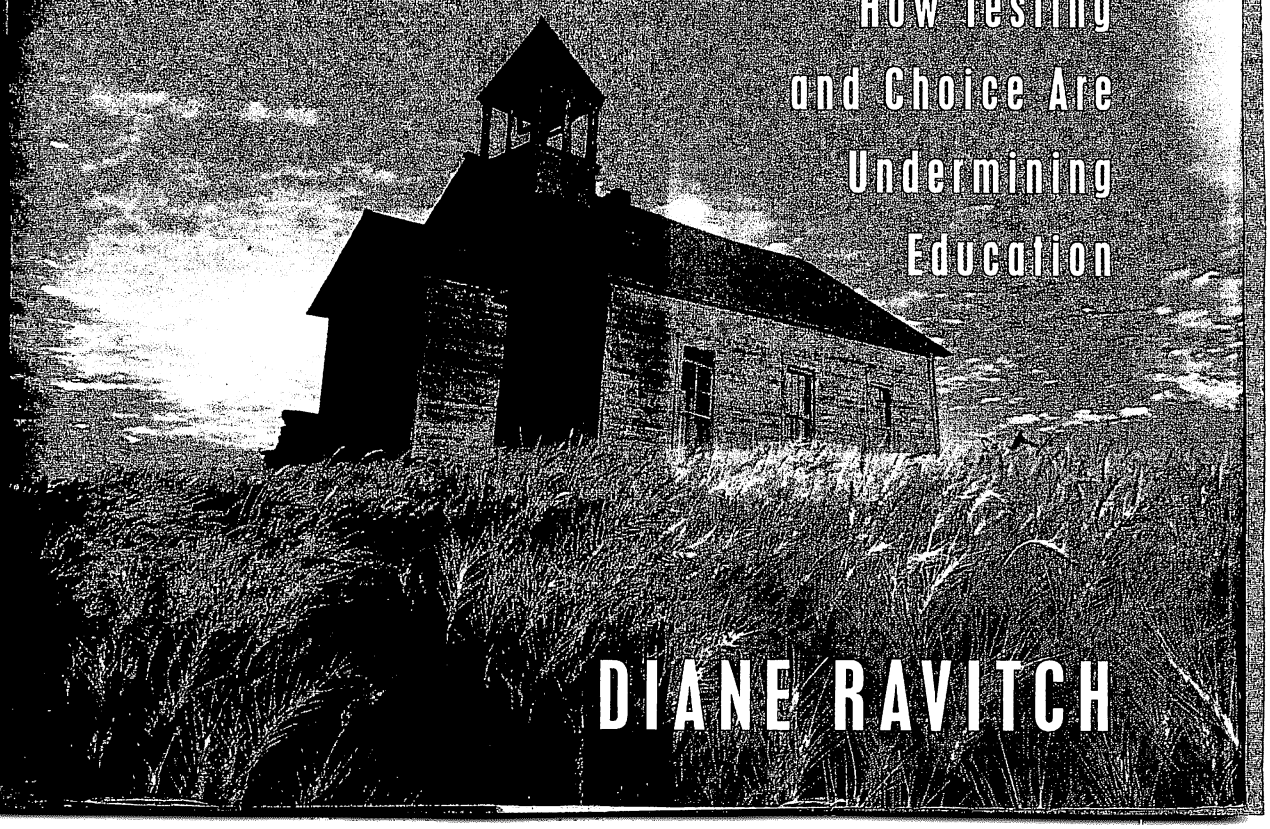
# THE DEATH AND LIFE OF THE GREAT AMERICAN School System

## How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education



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CHAPTER ONE

# What I Learned About School Reform

IN THE FALL OF 2007, I reluctantly decided to have my office repainted. It was inconvenient. I work at home, on the top floor of a nineteenth-century brownstone in Brooklyn. Not only did I have to stop working for three weeks, but I had the additional burden of packing up and removing everything in my office. I had to relocate fifty boxes of books and files to other rooms in the house until the painting job was complete.

After the patching, plastering, and painting was done, I began unpacking twenty years of papers and books, discarding those I no longer wanted, and placing articles into scrapbooks. You may wonder what all this mundane stuff has to do with my life in the education field. I found that the chore of reorganizing the artifacts of my professional life was pleasantly ruminative. It had a tonic effect, because it allowed me to reflect on the changes in my views over the years.

At the very time that I was packing up my books and belongings, I was going through an intellectual crisis. I was aware that I had undergone a wrenching transformation in my perspective on school reform. Where once I had been hopeful, even enthusiastic, about the potential benefits of testing, accountability, choice, and markets, I now found myself experiencing profound doubts about these same ideas. I was trying to sort through the evidence about what was working and what was not. I was trying to understand why

I was increasingly skeptical about these reforms, reforms that I had supported enthusiastically. I was trying to see my way through the blinding assumptions of ideology and politics, including my own.

I kept asking myself why I was losing confidence in these reforms. My answer: I have a right to change my mind. Fair enough. But why, I kept wondering, why had I changed my mind? What was the compelling evidence that prompted me to reevaluate the policies I had endorsed many times over the previous decade? Why did I now doubt ideas I once had advocated?

The short answer is that my views changed as I saw how these ideas were working out in reality. The long answer is what will follow in the rest of this book. When someone chastised John Maynard Keynes for reversing himself about a particular economic policy he had previously endorsed, he replied, "When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?"[1] This comment may or may not be apocryphal, but I admire the thought behind it. It is the mark of a sentient human being to learn from experience, to pay close attention to how theories work out when put into practice.

What should we think of someone who never admits error, never entertains doubt but adheres unflinchingly to the same ideas all his life, regardless of new evidence? Doubt and skepticism are signs of rationality. When we are too certain of our opinions, we run the risk of ignoring any evidence that conflicts with our views. It is doubt that shows we are still thinking, still willing to reexamine hardened beliefs when confronted with new facts and new evidence.

The task of sorting my articles gave me the opportunity to review what I had written at different times, beginning in the mid-1960s. As I flipped from article to article, I kept asking myself, how far had I strayed from where I started? Was it like me to shuffle off ideas like an ill-fitting coat? As I read and skimmed and remembered, I began to see two themes at the center of what I have been writing for more than four decades. One constant has been my skepticism about pedagogical fads, enthusiasms, and movements. The other has been a deep belief in the value of a rich, coherent school curriculum, especially in history and literature, both of which are so frequently ignored, trivialized, or politicized.[2]

Over the years, I have consistently warned against the lure of "the royal road to learning," the notion that some savant or organization has found an easy solution to the problems of American education. As a historian of education, I have often studied the rise and fall

of grand ideas that were promoted as the sure cure for whatever ills were afflicting our schools and students. In 1907, William Chandler Bagley complained about the "fads and reforms that sweep through the educational system at periodic intervals." A few years later, William Henry Maxwell, the esteemed superintendent of schools in New York City, heaped scorn on educational theorists who promoted their panaceas to gullible teachers; one, he said, insisted that "vertical penmanship" was the answer to all problems; another maintained that recess was a "relic of barbarism." Still others wanted to ban spelling and grammar to make school more fun.[3] I have tried to show in my work the persistence of our national infatuation with fads, movements, and reforms, which invariably distract us from the steadiness of purpose needed to improve our schools.

In our own day, policymakers and business leaders have eagerly enlisted in a movement launched by free-market advocates, with the support of major foundations. Many educators have their doubts about the slogans and cure-alls of our time, but they are required to follow the mandates of federal law (such as No Child Left Behind) despite their doubts.

School reformers sometimes resemble the characters in Dr. Seuss's *Solla Sollew,* who are always searching for that mythical land "where they never have troubles, at least very few." Or like Dumbo, they are convinced they could fly if only they had a magic feather. In my writings, I have consistently warned that, in education, there are no shortcuts, no utopias, and no silver bullets. For certain, there are no magic feathers that enable elephants to fly.

As I flipped through the yellowing pages in my scrapbooks, I started to understand the recent redirection of my thinking, my growing doubt regarding popular proposals for choice and accountability. Once again, I realized, I was turning skeptical in response to panaceas and miracle cures. The only difference was that in this case, I too had fallen for the latest panaceas and miracle cures; I too had drunk deeply of the elixir that promised a quick fix to intractable problems. I too had jumped aboard a bandwagon, one festooned with banners celebrating the power of accountability, incentives, and markets. I too was captivated by these ideas. They promised to end bureaucracy, to ensure that poor children were not neglected, to empower poor parents, to enable poor children to escape failing schools, and to close the achievement gap between rich and poor, black and white. Testing would shine a spotlight on low-performing

schools, and choice would create opportunities for poor kids to leave for better schools. All of this seemed to make sense, but there was little empirical evidence, just promise and hope. I wanted to share the promise and the hope. I wanted to believe that choice and accountability would produce great results. But over time, I was persuaded by accumulating evidence that the latest reforms were not likely to live up to their promise. The more I saw, the more I lost the faith.

It seemed, therefore, that it would be instructive to take a fresh look at the reform strategies that are now so prominent in American education and to review the evidence of their effectiveness. This book is my opportunity to explain what I have learned about school reform and also to suggest, with (I hope) a certain degree of modesty and full acknowledgment of my own frailties and errors, what is needed to move American education in the right direction.

THE FIRST ARTICLE I EVER WROTE about education was published in a small (and now defunct) education journal called the *Urban Review* in 1968. Its title—"Programs, Placebos, Panaceas"—signaled what turned out to be a constant preoccupation for me, the conflict between promise and reality, between utopian hopes and knotty problems. I reviewed short-term compensatory education programs—that is, short-term interventions to help kids who were far behind—and concluded that "only sustained quality education makes a difference." My second article, titled "Foundations: Playing God in the Ghetto" (1969), discussed the Ford Foundation's role in the protracted controversy over decentralization and community control that led to months of turmoil in the public schools of New York City.[4] This question—the extent to which it is appropriate for a mega-rich foundation to take charge of reforming public schools, even though it is accountable to no one and elected by no one—will be treated in this book. The issue is especially important today, because some of the nation's largest foundations are promoting school reforms based on principles drawn from the corporate sector, without considering whether they are appropriate for educational institutions.

In the late 1960s, the issue of decentralization versus centralization turned into a heated battle. Newspapers featured daily stories about community groups demanding decentralization of the schools and blaming teachers and administrators for the school system's

lack of success with minority children. Many school reformers then assumed that African American and Hispanic parents and local community leaders, not professional educators, knew best what their children needed.

As the clamor to decentralize the school system grew, I became curious about why the system had been centralized in the first place. I spent many days in the New-York Historical Society library studying the history of the city's school system; the last such history had been published in 1905. I discovered that the system had been decentralized in the nineteenth century. The school reformers of the 1890s demanded centralization as an antidote to low-performing schools and advocated control by professionals as the cure for the incompetence and corruption of local school boards. As I read, I was struck by the ironic contrast between the reformers' demands in the 1890s for centralization and the reformers' demands in the 1960s for decentralization. The earlier group consisted mainly of social elites, the latter of parents and activists who wanted local control of the schools.

So intrigued was I by the contrast between past and present that I determined to write a history of the New York City public schools, which became *The Great School Wars: New York City, 1805–1973*.[5] This was quite a challenge for someone who had graduated from the Houston public schools and—at that time—had no advanced degrees in history or education. As I was completing the book, I earned a doctorate from Columbia University in the history of American education, and the book became my dissertation. While writing and pursuing my graduate studies, I worked under the tutelage of Lawrence Cremin, the greatest historian of American education of his era.

In the mid-1970s, Cremin persuaded me to write a critique of a group of leftist historians who attacked the underpinnings of public schooling. They called themselves revisionists, because they set themselves the goal of demolishing what they saw as a widespread myth about the benevolent purposes and democratic accomplishments of public education. The authors, all of them professors at various universities, treated the public schools scornfully as institutions devised by elites to oppress the poor. This point of view was so contrary to my own understanding of the liberating role of public education—not only in my own life but also in the life of the nation—that I felt compelled to refute it.

The resulting book was called *The Revisionists Revised: A Critique of the Radical Attack on the Schools*.[6] In that book, I defended the democratic, civic purposes of public schooling. I argued that the public schools had not been devised by scheming capitalists to impose "social control" on an unwilling proletariat or to reproduce social inequality; the schools were never an instrument of cultural repression, as the radical critics claimed. Instead, I held, they are a primary mechanism through which a democratic society gives its citizens the opportunity to attain literacy and social mobility. Opportunity leaves much to individuals; it is not a guarantee of certain success. The schools cannot solve all our social problems, nor are they perfect. But in a democratic society, they are necessary and valuable for individuals and for the commonweal.

My next book was a history of national education policy from 1945 to 1980, an era notable for major court decisions and federal legislation. In *The Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945–1980*, I analyzed the many fascinating controversies associated with McCarthyism, progressive education, the civil rights movement, bilingual education, the women's movement, and other social and political upheavals.[7]

While writing *The Troubled Crusade*, I became increasingly interested in issues related to the quality of the curriculum. I began studying the history of pedagogy, curriculum, and standards, especially the teaching of literature and history and the representation of our culture in schools. In 1987, I coauthored a book with my friend Chester E. (Checker) Finn Jr. called *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?* which reported on the first federal test of history and literature. We lamented what seemed to be a loss of cultural memory, a position that hit a public nerve but was scorned in the academic world, which was then caught up in postmodernism and a revolt against "the canon." Our view was that you can't reject the canon if you have no knowledge of it.[8]

In 1985, California State Superintendent Bill Honig invited me to help write a new history curriculum for the state. Over a two-year period, I worked closely with teachers and scholars to draft a curriculum framework that integrated history with literature, geography, the arts, social sciences, and humanities. With this framework, California would become the first state to require all students to study three years of world history and three years of U.S. history, with a substantial infusion of history and biography in the elementary

grades. The framework was adopted by the State Board of Education in 1987 and remains in place to this day with only minor revisions to update it. Over the past two decades, the state of California replaced its reading curriculum, its mathematics curriculum, and its science curriculum, but the history curriculum—touching on some of the most sensitive and controversial topics and events in American and world history—endured.[9]

I had not, to this point in my life, given much thought to issues of choice, markets, or accountability.

Then something unexpected happened: I received a telephone call in the spring of 1991 from President George H. W. Bush's newly appointed education secretary, Lamar Alexander. Alexander, a moderate Republican, had been governor of Tennessee. The secretary invited me to come to Washington to chat with him and his deputy David Kearns, who had recently been the chief executive officer of Xerox. We met for lunch at the elegant Hay-Adams Hotel, near the White House. We talked about curriculum and standards (Secretary Alexander later joked that I talked and he listened), and at the end of lunch he asked me to join the department as assistant secretary in charge of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement and as his counselor.

I went home to Brooklyn to think about it. I was a registered Democrat, always had been, and had never dreamed of working in a government job, let alone a Republican administration. I had no desire to leave Brooklyn or to abandon my life as a scholar. And yet I was intrigued by the thought of working in the federal government. Surely education was a nonpartisan issue, or so I then imagined. I decided that this would be a wonderful opportunity to perform public service, learn about federal politics, and do something totally different. I said yes, was confirmed by the Senate, moved to Washington, and spent the next eighteen months as assistant secretary and counselor to the secretary in the U.S. Department of Education.

During my time at the department, I took the lead on issues having to do with curriculum and standards. The federal government is prohibited by law from imposing any curriculum on states or school districts. Nonetheless, my agency used its very small allotment of discretionary funds (about $10 million) to make grants to consortia of educators to develop "voluntary national standards" in every academic subject. Our assumption was that so long as the standards were developed by independent professional groups and were

voluntary, we were not violating the legal prohibition against imposing curriculum on states and school districts. And so we funded the development of voluntary national standards in history, the arts, geography, civics, science, economics, foreign languages, and English. We did this energetically but without specific congressional authorization; the absence of authorization unfortunately lessened the projects' credibility and longevity.

The Department of Education was committed to both standards and choice (choice was even higher on the agenda of Republicans than standards, because Republicans generally opposed national standards, which suggested federal meddling). At meetings of top staff in the department, I sat in on many discussions of school choice in which the question was not whether to support choice, but how to do so. The issue of choice had never been important to me, but I found myself trying to incorporate the arguments for choice into my own worldview. I reasoned that standards would be even more necessary in a society that used public dollars to promote school choice. The more varied the schools, the more important it would be to have common standards to judge whether students were learning. I began to sympathize with the argument for letting federal dollars follow poor students to the school of their choice. If kids were not succeeding in their regular public school, why not let them take their federal funds to another public school or to a private—even religious—school? Since affluent families could choose their schools by moving to a better neighborhood or enrolling their children in private schools, why shouldn't poor families have similar choices?

In the decade following my stint in the federal government, I argued that certain managerial and structural changes—that is, choice, charters, merit pay, and accountability—would help to reform our schools. With such changes, teachers and schools would be judged by their performance; this was a basic principle in the business world. Schools that failed to perform would be closed, just as a corporation would close a branch office that continually produced poor returns. Having been immersed in a world of true believers, I was influenced by their ideas. I became persuaded that the business-minded thinkers were onto something important. Their proposed reforms were meant to align public education with the practices of modern, flexible, high-performance organizations and to enable American education to make the transition from the industrial age to the postindustrial age. In the 1990s, I found myself in

step with people who quoted Peter Drucker and other management gurus. I dropped casual references to "total quality management" and the Baldridge Award, both of which I learned about by listening to David Kearns during my stint in the Department of Education.

During this time, I wrote many articles advocating structural innovations. In the past, I would have cast a cold eye on efforts to "reinvent the schools" or to "break the mold," but now I supported bold attempts to remake the schools, such as charter schools, privatization, and specialized schools of all kinds. I maintained that we should celebrate the creation of good schools, no matter what form they took or who developed them.

Both the Bush administration and the Clinton administration advocated market reforms for the public sector, including deregulation and privatization. Bill Clinton and the New Democrats championed a "third way" between the orthodox policies of the left and the right. People in both parties quoted *Reinventing Government* by David Osborne and Ted Gaebler as a guide to cutting down bureaucracy and injecting entrepreneurship into government.[10] Months after his inauguration, President Clinton tasked Vice President Al Gore to devise ways to "reinvent" the federal bureaucracy, and he did. With the help of David Osborne, Gore created the National Partnership for Reinventing Government, whose purpose was to adapt private sector management techniques to the public sector. Many of its recommendations involved privatizing, cutting jobs, and implementing performance agreements in which agencies would receive autonomy from regulations in exchange for meeting targets.[11]

Similar ideas began to percolate in the world of public education. The new thinking—now ensconced in both parties—saw the public school system as obsolete, because it is controlled by the government and burdened by bureaucracy. Government-run schools, said a new generation of reformers, are ineffective because they are a monopoly; as such, they have no incentive to do better, and they serve the interests of adults who work in the system, not children. Democrats saw an opportunity to reinvent government; Republicans, a chance to diminish the power of the teachers' unions, which, in their view, protect jobs and pensions while blocking effective management and innovation.

This convergence explained the bipartisan appeal of charter schools. Why shouldn't schools be managed by anyone who could supply good schools, using government funds? Free of direct government

control, the schools would be innovative, hire only the best teachers, get rid of incompetent teachers, set their own pay scales, compete for students (customers), and be judged solely by their results (test scores and graduation rates). Good schools under private management would proliferate, while bad schools would be closed down by market forces (the exit of disgruntled parents) or by a watchful government. Some of the new generation of reformers—mainly Republicans, but not only Republicans—imagined that the schools of the future would function without unions, allowing management to hire and fire personnel at will. With the collapse of Communism and the triumph of market reforms in most parts of the world, it did not seem to be much of a stretch to envision the application of the market model to schooling.

Like many others in that era, I was attracted to the idea that the market would unleash innovation and bring greater efficiencies to education. I was certainly influenced by the conservative ideology of other top-level officials in the first Bush administration, who were strong supporters of school choice and competition. But of equal importance, I believe, I began to think like a policymaker, especially a federal policymaker. That meant, in the words of a book by James C. Scott that I later read and admired, I began "seeing like a state," looking at schools and teachers and students from an altitude of 20,000 feet and seeing them as objects to be moved around by big ideas and great plans.[12]

Anyone who is a policymaker, aspires to be a policymaker, or wants to influence policymakers must engage in "seeing like a state." It is inevitable. Policymaking requires one to make decisions that affect people's lives without their having a chance to cast a vote. If no one thought like a state, there would probably be no highways or public works of any kind. Those who make the most noise would veto almost everything. It is the job of representative government to make decisions without seeking a majority vote from their constituents on every single question. Anyone who recommends a change of federal or state policy engages in "seeing like a state." Improvement also depends on having a mix of views and new ideas to prevent the status quo from becoming ossified. Those who make policy are most successful when they must advance their ideas through a gauntlet of checks and balances, explaining their plans, submitting them to a process of public review, and attempting to persuade others to

support them. If the policymaker cannot persuade others, then his plans will not be implemented. That's democracy.

How can I distinguish between thinking like a historian and seeing like a state? A historian tries to understand what happened, why it happened, what was the context, who did what, and what assumptions led them to act as they did. A historian customarily displays a certain diffidence about trying to influence events, knowing that unanticipated developments often lead to unintended consequences. A policymaker, on the other hand, is required to plan for the future and make bets about a course of action that is likely to bring about improvements. Policymakers have a theory of action, even if they can't articulate it, and they implement plans based on their theory of action, their guess about how the world works. Historians are trained to recognize assumptions and theories and to spot their flaws.

Market reforms have a certain appeal to some of those who are accustomed to "seeing like a state." There is something comforting about the belief that the invisible hand of the market, as Adam Smith called it, will bring improvements through some unknown force. In education, this belief in market forces lets us ordinary mortals off the hook, especially those who have not figured out how to improve low-performing schools or to break through the lassitude of unmotivated teens. Instead of dealing with rancorous problems like how to teach reading or how to improve testing, one can redesign the management and structure of the school system and concentrate on incentives and sanctions. One need not know anything about children or education. The lure of the market is the idea that freedom from government regulation is a solution all by itself. This is very appealing, especially when so many seemingly well-planned school reforms have failed to deliver on their promise.

The new corporate reformers betray their weak comprehension of education by drawing false analogies between education and business. They think they can fix education by applying the principles of business, organization, management, law, and marketing and by developing a good data-collection system that provides the information necessary to incentivize the workforce—principals, teachers, and students—with appropriate rewards and sanctions. Like these reformers, I wrote and spoke with conviction in the 1990s and early 2000s about what was needed to reform public education, and many of my ideas coincided with theirs.

I have long been allied with conservative scholars and organizations. My scholarly work at Teachers College and later at New York University was supported by conservative foundations, principally the John M. Olin Foundation, which never sought to influence anything I wrote. My close friend Checker Finn took over the helm of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in 1996, and I was a member of its board until 2009. We previously worked together as organizers of the Educational Excellence Network in 1981, which advocated for a solid curriculum and high standards.

In 1999, I became a founding member of the Koret Task Force at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University; the task force supports education reforms based on the principles of standards, accountability, and choice. Most of the members of the task force are forceful advocates of school choice and accountability. John Chubb and Terry Moe wrote a highly successful book promoting choice. Caroline Hoxby, Eric Hanushek, Paul Peterson, Paul Hill, Checker Finn, Bill Evers, and Herbert Walberg are well-known scholars and/or advocates of choice, competition, and accountability. In a debate at Hoover, Don Hirsch and I argued against Hoxby and Peterson that curriculum and instruction were more important than markets and choice.[13] I enjoyed the camaraderie of the group, and I loved the intellectual stimulation I encountered at the Hoover Institution. But over time I realized that I was no longer fully supportive of the task force's aims. When I told my colleagues that I felt I had to leave, they urged me to stay and debate with them. I did for a time, but in April 2009 I resigned.

I grew increasingly disaffected from both the choice movement and the accountability movement. I was beginning to see the downside of both and to understand that they were not solutions to our educational dilemmas. As I watched both movements gain momentum across the nation, I concluded that curriculum and instruction were far more important than choice and accountability. I feared that choice would let thousands of flowers bloom but would not strengthen American education. It might even harm the public schools by removing the best students from schools in the poorest neighborhoods. I was also concerned that accountability, now a shibboleth that everyone applauds, had become mechanistic and even antithetical to good education. Testing, I realized with dismay, had become a central preoccupation in the schools and was not just a measure but an end in itself. I came to believe that accountability,

as written into federal law, was not raising standards but dumbing down the schools as states and districts strived to meet unrealistic targets.

The more uneasy I grew with the agenda of choice and accountability, the more I realized that I am too "conservative" to embrace an agenda whose end result is entirely speculative and uncertain. The effort to upend American public education and replace it with something market-based began to feel too radical for me. I concluded that I could not countenance any reforms that might have the effect—intended or unintended—of undermining public education. Paradoxically, it was my basic conservatism about values, traditions, communities, and institutions that made me back away from what once was considered the conservative agenda but has now become the bipartisan agenda in education.

Before long, I found that I was reverting to my once familiar pattern as a friend and supporter of public education. Over time, my doubts about accountability and choice deepened as I saw the negative consequences of their implementation.

As I went back to work in my freshly painted office and reviewed the historical record of my intellectual wanderings, deviations, and transgressions, I decided to write about what I had learned. I needed to explain why I had returned to my roots as a partisan of American public education. I wanted to describe where we have gone astray in our pursuit of worthy goals. We as a society cannot extricate ourselves from fads and nostrums unless we carefully look at how we got entangled in them. We will continue to chase rainbows unless we recognize that they are rainbows and there is no pot of gold at the end of them. We certainly cannot address our problems unless we are willing to examine the evidence about proposed solutions, without fear, favor, or preconceptions.

It is time, I think, for those who want to improve our schools to focus on the essentials of education. We must make sure that our schools have a strong, coherent, explicit curriculum that is grounded in the liberal arts and sciences, with plenty of opportunity for children to engage in activities and projects that make learning lively. We must ensure that students gain the knowledge they need to understand political debates, scientific phenomena, and the world they live in. We must be sure they are prepared for the responsibilities of democratic citizenship in a complex society. We must take care that our teachers are well educated, not just well trained. We must be

sure that schools have the authority to maintain both standards of learning and standards of behavior.

In this book, I will describe the evidence that changed my views about reforms that once seemed promising. I will explain why I have concluded that most of the reform strategies that school districts, state officials, the Congress, and federal officials are pursuing, that mega-rich foundations are supporting, and that editorial boards are applauding are mistaken. I will attempt to explain how these mistaken policies are corrupting educational values. I will describe the policies that I believe are necessary ingredients in a good system of public education. I will not claim that my ideas will solve all our problems all at once and forever. I will not offer a silver bullet or a magic feather. I do claim, however, that we must preserve American public education, because it is so intimately connected to our concepts of citizenship and democracy and to the promise of American life. In view of the money and power now arrayed on behalf of the ideas and programs that I will criticize, I hope it is not too late.

CHAPTER TWO

# Hijacked! How the Standards Movement Turned Into the Testing Movement

IN THE FIRST DECADE of the twenty-first century, the leading reform ideas in American education were accountability and choice. These ideas were at the heart of President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind program, which he signed into law in January 2002. No Child Left Behind—or NCLB—changed the nature of public schooling across the nation by making standardized test scores the primary measure of school quality. The rise or fall of test scores in reading and mathematics became the critical variable in judging students, teachers, principals, and schools. Missing from NCLB was any reference to what students should learn; this was left to each state to determine.

I was initially supportive of NCLB. Who could object to ensuring that children mastered the basic skills of reading and mathematics? Who could object to an annual test of those skills? Certainly not I. Didn't all schools test their students at least once annually?

As NCLB was implemented, I became increasingly disillusioned. I came to realize that the law bypassed curriculum and standards. Although its supporters often claimed it was a natural outgrowth of the standards movement, it was not. It demanded that schools generate higher test scores in basic skills, but it required no

curriculum at all, nor did it raise standards. It ignored such important studies as history, civics, literature, science, the arts, and geography. Though the law required states to test students eventually in science, the science scores didn't count on the federal scorecard. I saw my hopes for better education turn into a measurement strategy that had no underlying educational vision at all. Eventually I realized that the new reforms had everything to do with structural changes and accountability, and nothing at all to do with the substance of learning. Accountability makes no sense when it undermines the larger goals of education.

How did testing and accountability become the main levers of school reform? How did our elected officials become convinced that measurement and data would fix the schools? Somehow our nation got off track in its efforts to improve education. What once was the standards movement was replaced by the accountability movement. What once was an effort to improve the quality of education turned into an accounting strategy: Measure, then punish or reward. No education experience was needed to administer such a program. Anyone who loved data could do it. The strategy produced fear and obedience among educators; it often generated higher test scores. But it had nothing to do with education.

Tests should follow the curriculum. They should be based on the curriculum. They should not replace it or precede it. Students need a coherent foundation of knowledge and skills that grows stronger each year. Knowledge and skills are both important, as is learning to think, debate, and question. A well-educated person has a well-furnished mind, shaped by reading and thinking about history, science, literature, the arts, and politics. The well-educated person has learned how to explain ideas and listen respectfully to others.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, efforts to revive liberal education in the schools seemed to be gaining ground; many states were reviewing their academic expectations with an eye to strengthening them in all grades. In 1991 and 1992, the agency that I headed in the U.S. Department of Education awarded grants to consortia of professional groups of teachers and scholars to develop voluntary national standards in history, English language arts, science, civics, economics, the arts, foreign languages, geography, and physical education.[1] I acted at the direction of Secretary Lamar Alexander, who believed as I did that all children should have access to a broad education in the arts and sciences.

The efforts to establish voluntary national standards fell apart in the fall of 1994, when Lynne V. Cheney attacked the not-yet-released history standards for their political bias. As chairperson of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Cheney had funded their development along with the Department of Education. Cheney's scathing critique in the *Wall Street Journal* opened up a bitter national argument about what history, or rather, *whose* history, should be taught.[2]

Cheney lambasted the standards as the epitome of left-wing political correctness, because they emphasized the nation's failings and paid scant attention to its great men. The standards document, she said, mentioned Joseph McCarthy and McCarthyism nineteen times, the Ku Klux Klan seventeen times, and Harriet Tubman six times, while mentioning Ulysses S. Grant just once and Robert E. Lee not at all. Nor was there any reference to Paul Revere, Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, Jonas Salk, or the Wright brothers. Cheney told an interviewer that the document was a "warped and distorted version of the American past in which it becomes a story of oppression and failure."[3]

Editorialists and radio talk shows across the country weighed in on the dispute, some siding with Cheney, others defending the standards. Every major newspaper and newsmagazine covered the story of the angry ideological conflict. The controversy quickly became a debate about the role of minority groups and women in American history, which was placed in opposition to the role of great white men. Radio host Rush Limbaugh said the standards should be "flushed down the toilet," but they were endorsed by many editorial boards and historians.[4]

Unfortunately, the historians at the University of California at Los Angeles who supervised the writing of the history standards did not anticipate that their political views and their commitment to teaching social history through the lens of race, class, and gender would encounter resistance outside the confines of academe. They insisted that their critics were narrow-minded conservatives who opposed the standards' efforts to open American history to a diversity of cultures.

Meanwhile, in D.C., the administration changed from George H. W. Bush to Bill Clinton, and in the turnover, there was no provision for oversight of the standards, no process by which they might be reviewed and revised, again and again, to remove any hint of

political bias. After Cheney raised a ruckus about the history standards, elected officials in Washington wanted nothing to do with them. The Clinton administration disowned them, pointing out that it had not commissioned them. In January 1995, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution condemning them by a vote of 99–1 (the lone dissenter, a senator from Louisiana, thought the resolution was not strong enough).[5] After the vitriolic front-page battle over the history standards, the subject of standards, curriculum, and content became radioactive to political leaders.

I was disappointed by the national history standards, but unlike Cheney I thought they could be fixed by editing. When the controversy first exploded into public view, I told *Education Week* that the document was a very good start, but "they should keep working on it, make it more parsimonious, and get out whatever seems to be biased in terms of politics. It shouldn't have a whiff of political partisanship from the left or the right." I wrote a letter to the *New York Times*, which had editorially supported the standards, warning that the history standards had to be "depoliticized," because they were jeopardizing the bipartisan movement to set voluntary national standards.[6] In the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, I argued that the history standards should be revised, not abandoned. I worried that the controversy would "lead to the demise of the entire effort to set national standards, even in less contentious fields, such as mathematics and science." I insisted that national standards would succeed only as long as they were voluntary and nonpartisan and avoided "any effort to impose 'correct' answers on disputed questions." I concluded that the project to develop national standards was at a crossroads; either we as a nation would recognize that much more time was needed to do it right, or the entire effort would be abandoned. I predicted, "The questions that will soon be answered are: Will we learn from our mistakes and keep trying? Or will we give up?"[7]

In hindsight, it is clear that we gave up, in reaction to the media firestorm. The politicians whose leadership and endorsement were needed to establish national standards lost interest. Senators, congressmen, and governors watched the spectacle and determined that it was political suicide to get involved in the contretemps. To Republicans, national standards were anathema, a policy that would turn our education system over to leftist academics, a point that Lynne Cheney drove home again and again in her newspaper articles and public appearances. To Democrats, national standards sounded like

a good idea—after all, Bill Clinton had run for office with a promise to establish national standards and assessments[8]—but after the debacle associated with the history standards, the Clinton administration backed away from national standards.

Even as the history standards came into disrepute, the Clinton administration was writing its own legislation to promote standards and accountability. Having seen the political disaster that erupted around the national history standards, administration strategists concluded that it would be politically impossible to forge federally directed academic standards, even voluntary ones. So they punted: The law they wrote said that every state should write its own standards, pick its own tests, and be accountable for achievement. The task of identifying what students should learn—the heart of curriculum standards—was left to each state.

The Clinton administration's Goals 2000 program gave the states federal money to write their own academic standards, but most of the state standards were vague when it came to any curriculum content. It seemed that the states had learned from the battle over the history standards that it was better to say nothing than to provoke controversy by setting out any real curriculum standards. Most state standards were windy rhetoric, devoid of concrete descriptions of what students should be expected to know and be able to do. One exception was Massachusetts, which produced stellar state standards in every subject area. But most states wrote social studies standards in which history was mentioned tangentially, with few or no references to names, events, or ideas. The states seemed to understand that avoiding specifics was the best policy; that standards were best if they were completely noncontroversial; and that standards would survive scrutiny only if they said nothing and changed nothing.

A few examples should suffice. A typical middle-school history standard says that "students will demonstrate an understanding of how ideas, events, and conditions bring about change." A typical high school history standard says that "students will demonstrate an understanding of the chronology and concepts of history and identify and explain historical relationships." Or, "explain, analyze, and show connections among patterns of change and continuity by applying key historical concepts, such as time, chronology, causality, change, conflict, complexity, and movement."[9] Since these statements do not refer to any actual historical event, they do not require students to know any history. They contain no historical content that

students might analyze, debate, or reflect on. Unfortunately, they are typical of most state standards in history. The much-maligned voluntary national history standards of 1994, by contrast, are intellectually challenging, because they expected students to discuss the causes and consequences of the American Revolution, the Great Depression, world wars, and other major events in American history. Without specificity and clarity, standards are nothing more than vacuous verbiage.

State standards for the English language arts are similarly vapid. Few states refer to a single significant work of literature that students are expected to read. In most states, the English standards avoid any mention of specific works of fiction or nonfiction or specific major authors. Instead, they babble about how students "interact with text," apply "word analysis and vocabulary skills to comprehend selections," "relate reading to prior knowledge and experience and make connections to related information," "make text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections," use "language processes" as "meaning-making processes," engage in "meaningful literacy activities," and "use effective reading strategies to achieve their purposes in reading." Students should certainly think about what they read, but they should read something worth thinking about.[10]

The standards movement died in 1995, when the controversy over the national history standards came to a high boil. And the state standards created as a substitute for national standards steered clear of curriculum content. So, with a few honorable exceptions, the states wrote and published vague documents and called them standards. Teachers continued to rely on their textbooks to determine what to teach and test. The tests and textbooks, written for students across the nation, provided a low-level sort of national standard. Business leaders continued to grouse that they had to spend large amounts of money to train new workers; the media continued to highlight the mediocre performance of American students on international tests; and colleges continued to report that about a third of their freshmen needed remediation in the basic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics.

When Governor George W. Bush of Texas was elected president in 2000, he decided that education reform would be his first priority. He brought with him the Texas plan: testing and accountability. Bush's No Child Left Behind program melded smoothly with a central feature of the Clinton administration's Goals 2000 program:

namely, leaving it to the states to set their own standards and pick their own tests. Under the terms of NCLB, schools that did not demonstrate adequate progress toward the goal of making every student proficient in math and English by 2014 would be subject to increasingly onerous sanctions. But it was left to each state to decide what "proficiency" meant. So the states, most of which had vague and meaningless standards, were left free to determine what children should learn and how well they should learn it.[11] In effect, they were asked to grade themselves by creating tests that almost all children could eventually pass. NCLB was all sticks and no carrots. Test-based accountability—not standards—became our national education policy. There was no underlying vision of what education should be or how one might improve schools.

NCLB introduced a new definition of school reform that was applauded by Democrats and Republicans alike. In this new era, school reform was characterized as accountability, high-stakes testing, data-driven decision making, choice, charter schools, privatization, deregulation, merit pay, and competition among schools. Whatever could not be measured did not count. It was ironic that a conservative Republican president was responsible for the largest expansion of federal control in the history of American education. It was likewise ironic that Democrats embraced market reforms and other initiatives that traditionally had been favored by Republicans.

Nothing better portrayed the new climate than a charged battle during and after the 2008 presidential campaign over the definition of the term "reformer." During the campaign, the *New Republic* chided Democratic candidate Barack Obama for waffling on education reform. A real reformer, said this usually liberal magazine, was someone who supports competition between schools, charter schools, test-based accountability, performance pay for teachers, and No Child Left Behind, while being ready to battle the teachers' unions. This agenda, the article asserted, was shared by influential center-left think tanks in Washington, D.C., such as the Center for American Progress.[12]

After Obama's election, the media vigorously debated the new president's likely choice for secretary of education. For a brief time, it appeared that the new president might pick his main campaign adviser on education, scholar Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford University. This prospect alarmed the champions of corporate-style

reform, because Darling-Hammond was known as an advocate of teacher professionalism and a critic of Teach for America; the new breed of reformers thought she was too friendly with the teachers' unions. Consequently, writers in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and other publications warned President-elect Obama not to choose Darling-Hammond, but to select a "real" reformer who supported testing, accountability, and choice. True reformers, said the pundits and editorialists, fought the teachers' unions and demanded merit pay based on student test scores. True reformers closed low-performing schools and fired administrators and teachers. True reformers opposed teacher tenure. Never mind that these had long been the central tenets of the Republican approach to education reform.[13]

This rhetoric represented a remarkable turn of events. It showed how the politics of education had been transformed. The same views might as well have appeared in conservative journals, such as *National Review* or the *Weekly Standard*. Slogans long advocated by policy wonks on the right had migrated to and been embraced by policy wonks on the left. When Democratic think tanks say their party should support accountability and school choice, while rebuffing the teachers' unions, you can bet that something has fundamentally changed in the political scene. In 2008, these issues, which had been the exclusive property of the conservative wing of the Republican Party since Ronald Reagan's presidency, had somehow managed to captivate education thinkers in the Democratic Party as well.

WHERE DID EDUCATION REFORM GO WRONG? Ask the question, and you'll get different answers, depending on whom you ask. But all roads eventually lead back to a major report released in 1983 called *A Nation at Risk*.

It is important to understand *A Nation at Risk* (*ANAR*), its role in the rise and fall of the standards movement, and its contrast with No Child Left Behind. *ANAR* encouraged states and the nation to craft genuine curriculum standards in many subjects; this movement foundered when the history standards came under attack. Consequently, education leaders retreated into the relative safety of standardized testing of basic skills, which was a poor substitute for a full-fledged program of curriculum and assessments. In the trade-

off, our education system ended up with no curricular goals, low standards, and dumbed-down tests.

*A Nation at Risk* was a response to the radical school reforms of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Whoever remembers that era fondly is sure to dislike *ANAR*; conversely, whoever was skeptical toward the freewheeling reforms of those years is likely to admire *ANAR*. No one who lived in that time will forget the proliferation of experiments and movements in the nation's schools. Reformers differed mainly in terms of how radical their proposals were. The reforms of the era were proffered with the best of intentions; some stemmed from a desire to advance racial equity in the classroom and to broaden the curriculum to respect the cultural diversity of the population. Others were intended to liberate students from burdensome requirements. Still others proceeded in the spirit of A. S. Neill's *Summerhill*, where any sort of adult authority was strictly forbidden. Tear down the walls between the classrooms, said some reformers. Free the children, free the schools, abolish all rules and requirements. Let the English teacher teach math, and the math teacher teach English. Let students design their own courses and learn whatever they feel like learning whenever (or if ever) they feel like learning. Get rid of graduation requirements, college entrance requirements, grades, tests, and textbooks. Down with the canon. On it went, with reformers, radicals, and revolutionaries competing to outdo one another.[14]

And then one day in 1975, the *New York Times* reported on its front page that scores on the SAT—the nation's premier college entrance examination—had fallen steadily for over a decade.[15] The College Board, which sponsors the SAT, appointed an august commission to consider the likely causes of the score decline. The SAT commission in 1977 found plenty of reasons, including the increased numbers of minority students taking the test, whose test scores on average were lower than those of traditional test takers. But, said the commission, the test score decline was not entirely explained by the changing ethnic composition of the test takers. Some erosion in academic learning had probably been caused by large social forces, such as increased television viewing and the rising divorce rate, as well as political upheavals, such as the Vietnam War and Watergate. Significantly, the commission also concluded that changes in the schools' practices had contributed to the steady slippage of SAT scores, especially in the verbal portion. Students were taking fewer

basic academic courses and more fluffy electives; there was less assignment of homework, more absenteeism, and "less thoughtful and critical reading"; and, the commission noted, "careful writing has apparently about gone out of style."[16] The SAT report was soon followed by doleful federal reports about the state of the nation's schools, documenting falling enrollments in math and science and in foreign language study.[17]

Then in 1983 came *A Nation at Risk*, the all-time blockbuster of education reports. It was prepared by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, a group appointed by President Reagan's secretary of education, Terrel Bell. Bell was a subversive in the Reagan cabinet, a former school superintendent and a bona fide member of the education establishment. Whenever the president launched into a lecture about his desire to restore school prayer or to promote vouchers, Secretary Bell was notably silent.[18]

The report was an immediate sensation. Its conclusions were alarming, and its language was blunt to the point of being incendiary. It opened with the claim that "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments." The nation, it warned, has "been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament." Beset by conflicting demands, our educational institutions "seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them."[19]

In the years since *A Nation at Risk* was published, academics, educators, and pundits have debated whether the report was an accurate appraisal of academic standards or merely alarmist rhetoric by the Reagan administration, intended to undermine public education. The language was flamboyant, but that's how a report about education gets public attention. If it had been written in the usual somber, leaden tones of most national commissions, we would not be discussing it a generation later. *A Nation at Risk* was written in plain English, with just enough flair to capture the attention of the press. Its argument and recommendations made sense to nonspecialists. People who were not educators could understand its message, which thoughtfully addressed the fundamental issues in education. The national news media featured stories about the

"crisis in education." The report got what it wanted: the public's attention.

*A Nation at Risk* was notable for what it did not say. It did not echo Reagan's oft-expressed wish to abolish the U.S. Department of Education. It did not support or even discuss his other favorite education causes: vouchers and school prayer. It did not refer to market-based competition and choice among schools; it did not suggest restructuring schools or school systems. It said nothing about closing schools, privatization, state takeover of districts, or other heavy-handed forms of accountability. It referred only briefly, almost in passing, to testing. Instead, it addressed problems that were intrinsic to schooling, such as curriculum, graduation requirements, teacher preparation, and the quality of textbooks; it said nothing about the governance or organization of school districts, because these were not seen as causes of low performance.

Far from being a revolutionary document, the report was an impassioned plea to make our schools function better in their core mission as academic institutions and to make our education system live up to our nation's ideals. It warned that the nation would be harmed economically and socially unless education was dramatically improved for *all* children. While it did not specifically address issues of race and class, the report repeatedly stressed that the quality of education must improve across the board. What was truly at risk, it said, was the promise that "all, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost."[20] To that end, the report recommended stronger high school graduation requirements; higher standards for academic performance and student conduct; more time devoted to instruction and homework; and higher standards for entry into the teaching profession and better salaries for teachers.

The statistics it cited showed declining SAT scores from 1963 to 1980, as well as a decline in the number and proportion of high-scoring students on that test; lowered scores on standardized achievement tests; poor performance on international assessments; large numbers of functionally illiterate adults and seventeen-year-olds; the expansion of remedial courses on college campuses; and the cost of remedial training to the military and businesses.[21]

The primary cause of this inadequate academic performance, the commission said, was the steady erosion of the *content* of the

curriculum: "Secondary school curricula have been homogenized, diluted, and diffused to the point that they no longer have a central purpose. In effect, we have a cafeteria-style curriculum in which the appetizers and desserts can easily be mistaken for the main courses. Students have migrated from vocational and college preparatory programs to 'general track' courses in large numbers." The proportion in this general track—neither academic nor vocational—had grown from 12 percent in 1964 to 42 percent in 1979. This percentage exceeded that of enrollment in either the academic or the vocational track. This "curricular smorgasbord," combined with extensive student choice, led to a situation in which only small proportions of high school students completed standard, intermediate, and advanced courses. Second, the commission cited data to demonstrate that academic expectations had fallen over time—that students were not doing much homework, that high school graduation requirements were minimal, that college entry requirements had fallen, and that students were not taking as many courses in math and science as their peers in other nations.[22]

Although the report offered many recommendations, the most consequential, listed first in the report, was that high school graduation requirements should be strengthened. All high school students, the commission urged, should study what it called "The Five New Basics." This was to consist of four years of English, three years of mathematics, three years of science, three years of social studies, and one-half year of computer science. In addition, college-bound students should study at least two years of a foreign language. The commission proposed that foreign language study begin in elementary school and that schools include courses in the arts and vocational education in addition to the new basics.[23]

The commission did not just list the subjects to be studied; it succinctly defined the essential goals of each subject, without using jargon. For example, the commission said that the teaching of English "should equip graduates to: (a) comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and use what they read; (b) write well-organized, effective papers; (c) listen effectively and discuss ideas intelligently; and (d) know our literary heritage and how it enhances imagination and ethical understanding, and how it relates to the customs, ideas, and values of today's life and culture." The teaching of mathematics "should equip graduates to: (a) understand geometric and algebraic concepts; (b) understand elementary probability and statistics; (c) apply

mathematics in everyday situations; and (d) estimate, approximate, measure, and test the accuracy of their calculations." In addition to the traditional course of study for college-bound students, the commission recommended that "new, equally demanding mathematics curricula" be developed "for those who do not plan to continue their formal education immediately."[24] Again, none of this was revolutionary; the commission called on schools to educate all students well and to prepare them for whatever path they chose after high school.

*A Nation at Risk* proposed that four-year colleges and universities raise their admissions requirements. It urged scholars and professional societies to help upgrade the quality of textbooks and other teaching materials. It called on states to evaluate textbooks for their quality and to request that publishers present evidence of the effectiveness of their teaching materials, based on field trials and evaluations.

*A Nation at Risk* urged "significantly more time" for learning. High school students, it said, should receive more homework. *ANAR* called on school districts and states to lengthen the school day (to seven hours) and the school year (from the current 180 days to as many as 200 or 220 days). It called for firm, fair codes of conduct and for special classes or schools for children who were continually disruptive.

Those preparing to teach, said the commission, should be expected to meet high educational standards, by demonstrating not only their aptitude for teaching but also their competence in an academic discipline. Teachers' salaries should be increased and should be "professionally competitive, market-sensitive, and performance-based." Decisions about salary, tenure, promotion, and retention should be tied to peer review "so that superior teachers can be rewarded, average ones encouraged, and poor ones either improved or terminated."[25] The report recommended differential pay for teachers in relation to their quality, but proposed that judgments about teacher quality include peer review.

The commission correctly observed that "learning is the indispensable investment required for success in the 'information age' we are entering."[26] And it was right to say that those who are uneducated or poorly educated would be effectively excluded from material rewards and the chance to participate fully in our shared political and civic life. It was right to point to the curriculum as the heart of the matter, the definition of what students are expected to learn.

When the curriculum is incoherent and insubstantial, students are cheated.

*A Nation at Risk* was certainly not part of a right-wing plot to destroy public education or a precursor to the privatization movement of the 1990s and early twenty-first century.[27] Nor did it offer simple solutions to complex problems or demand the impossible. Every one of its recommendations was within the scope of the schools as they existed then and as they exist now, and none had any potential to harm public education. The report treated public education as a professional, purposeful enterprise that ought to have clear, attainable goals.

Some critics complained that the commission should have paid more attention to social and economic factors that affect educational outcomes, such as poverty, housing, welfare, and health.[28] That's a fair criticism. But the commission was asked to report on the quality of education in the nation's schools, so it focused on the academic aspects of education. When critics said *ANAR* unfairly blamed the nation's economic woes in the early 1980s on the schools, they took their argument too far, as if schools have nothing at all to do with a nation's economic health. When the economy subsequently improved, the critics asked, "Why aren't the schools getting credit for the upturn?" The critics confused the relationship between schools and the economy. Of course schools create human and social capital. Of course they are not the immediate cause of good times or bad times. Schools did not cause the Great Depression, nor can they claim credit for boom times. But economists have long recognized that good schools are important for a nation's future economic, civic, social, and cultural development.

The one consequential error of *A Nation at Risk* was its implication that the fundamental problems of American education resided solely in the nation's high schools and could be corrected by changes to that institution. The report assumed that elementary schools and junior high schools or middle schools were in fine shape and needed no special attention. But a closer look might have persuaded the commission that many students arrived in high school without the foundation of basic skills and knowledge essential to a good high school education. If the high school curriculum was a smorgasbord, the curriculum in the early grades was equally haphazard, lacking in coherence or content. This meant that students began their freshman year of high school with widely varying levels of preparation,

many without even the most rudimentary knowledge of history, science, literature, or other subjects. The commission blamed the high schools for the undereducated students who arrived at their doors. Whatever its deficiencies, the high school was not the cause of the poor preparation of its first-year students.

Today, when we contrast the rhetoric of *A Nation at Risk* with the reality of the No Child Left Behind legislation of 2002, *A Nation at Risk* looks positively idealistic, liberal, and prescient. *A Nation at Risk* was a report, not a legal mandate; if leaders in states and school districts wanted to implement its recommendations, they could; but they were also free to ignore the report and its recommendations. No Child Left Behind, however, was a federal law; any state or district that refused to comply with its mandates risked losing millions of dollars targeted to its neediest students. *A Nation at Risk* envisioned a public school system that offered a rich, well-balanced, and coherent curriculum, similar to what was available to students in the academic track in successful school districts. No Child Left Behind, by contrast, was bereft of any educational ideas. It was a technocratic approach to school reform that measured "success" only in relation to standardized test scores in two skill-based subjects, with the expectation that this limited training would strengthen our nation's economic competitiveness with other nations. This was misguided, since the nations with the most successful school systems do not impose such a narrow focus on their schools.

Whereas the authors of *A Nation at Risk* concerned themselves with the quality and breadth of the curriculum that every youngster should study, No Child Left Behind concerned itself only with basic skills. *A Nation at Risk* was animated by a vision of good education as the foundation of a better life for individuals and for our democratic society, but No Child Left Behind had no vision other than improving test scores in reading and math. It produced mountains of data, not educated citizens. Its advocates then treated that data as evidence of its "success." It ignored the importance of knowledge. It promoted a cramped, mechanistic, profoundly anti-intellectual definition of education. In the age of NCLB, knowledge was irrelevant.

By putting its emphasis on the importance of a coherent curriculum, *A Nation at Risk* was a precursor to the standards movement. It recognized that what students learn is of great importance in education and cannot be left to chance. When the standards movement collapsed as a result of the debacle of the national history standards,

the reform movement launched by *ANAR* was left without a strategy. To fill the lack, along came the test-based accountability movement, embodied by the No Child Left Behind law.

So, the great hijacking occurred in the mid-1990s when the standards movement fell apart. The passage of No Child Left Behind made testing and accountability our national education strategy. The controversies over national standards showed that a national consensus would be difficult to achieve and might set off a political brawl. State education departments are averse to controversy. Most states settled for "standards" that were bland and soporific to avoid battles over what students should learn. Education reformers in the states and in the federal government endorsed tests of basic skills as the only possible common ground in education. The goal of testing was higher scores, without regard to whether students acquired any knowledge of history, science, literature, geography, the arts, and other subjects that were not important for accountability purposes.

Whereas *A Nation at Risk* encouraged demands for voluntary national standards, No Child Left Behind sidestepped the need for any standards. In spirit and in specifics, they are not closely related. *ANAR* called for sensible, mainstream reforms to renew and repair our school system. The reforms it recommended were appropriate to the nature of schools: strengthening the curriculum for all students; setting clear and reasonable high school graduation requirements that demonstrate students' readiness for postsecondary education or the modern workplace; establishing clear and appropriate college entrance requirements; improving the quality of textbooks and tests; expecting students to spend more time on schoolwork; establishing higher requirements for new recruits into the teaching profession; and increasing teacher compensation.

These recommendations were sound in 1983. They are sound today.

+25 years?